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Flexicurity

Concepts, practices, and outcomes

Frank Tros and Ton Wilthagen

Introduction

The origins of the concept of flexicurity, which emerged in the mid 1990s, have to be seen in a historical context of labour market and welfare state developments. In many Western welfare states, the job and social security systems were developed after the Second World War, reaching a stage of 'completion' in the late 1960s and 1970s. The 1980s, however, can be typified as an era where deregulation and privatization appeared as the dominant political responses to economic and state budget crises. In the early 1990s, policy scientists started to notice that the 'deregulation versus regulation' or 'flexibility versus security' debates might be positioned and conceptualized too narrowly. Certain settings and forms of (re)regulation were considered conducive to economic performance (Streeck, 1992). Social policy was increasingly seen as a 'production factor' and social institutions were either perceived as 'harmless' with regard to economic growth, or thought to matter in a positive sense (Auer, 2001). Besides this regulation–deregulation nexus, the scientific debate observed a flexibility–security nexus (Wilthagen and Rogowski, 2002).

The quest for a new (dynamic) equilibrium, facilitating and enhancing the adaptability and capacity to deal with change of both individuals and companies has come to be labelled 'flexicurity'. Flexicurity is defined as 'a policy strategy to enhance, at the same time and in a deliberate way, the flexibility of labour markets, the work organization and employment relations on the one hand, and security–employment security and social security – notably for weaker groups in and outside the labour market – on the other hand' (Wilthagen and Tros, 2004). From a theoretical point of view this concept can be considered as a post-deregulation strategy (Keller and Seifert, 2000, p. 293) and can be characterized as a form of integration and synchronization of economic and social policy (Wynn, 2000, p. 501). The concept further has some common characteristics with the approach of 'transitional labour markets', as it is strongly connected to promoting and analysing transitions in the labour market and between the labour market and non-paid life domains (Schmid and Gazier, 2002).

European politics quickly picked up 'flexicurity' as a normative concept within the European Employment Strategy (EES) to strive for both economic adaptability and social cohesion (Bekker, 2011). Policy makers were inspired by the good economic performances – especially the high employment participation – in the 1990s of countries that were presented as 'flexicurity-countries', notably Denmark and the Netherlands. Besides acclaim, the concept has also met with criticism (see below). Nevertheless, the European Union (EU) has adopted 'flexicurity' as a key policy concept within the European Employment Strategy, as documented by the adaptation of 'Common Principles on Flexicurity' by the European Council on 6 December 2007; the report and resolutions on flexicurity from the European Parliament on 29 November; the joint labour market and flexicurity analysis presented by the European social partners on 18 October 2007; the Communication on flexicurity by the European Commission dated 27 June 2007; and the much debated Green Paper on the Modernization of Labour Law issued 22 November 2006. The concept has become a European flagship policy that has been re-confirmed within the EU's 2020 strategy and, most recently, the Euro Plus Pact.

The European Commission has mapped out 'flexicurity pathways' that can be designed and implemented across the following four policy components:

- Flexible and reliable contractual arrangements
- Efficient active labour market policies to strengthen transition security
- Systematic and responsive lifelong learning
- Modern social security provisions that also contribute to good mobility in the labour market.

The first pathway addresses the issue of flexibility at the margin of the labour market. It suggests reducing asymmetries between standard and non-standard work by promoting upward transitions in the labour market and by integrating non-standard contracts fully into labour law, collective agreements, social security, and lifelong learning systems.

The second pathway emphasizes safe and productive job-to-job transitions either within the company (especially to enhance the employability and skills of workers) or outside the company once the necessity arises.

The third pathway recommends the access to learning and good transitions for all, notably groups in the labour market that risk exclusion. It recommends strengthening investments in skills and research and development to enhance productivity and employment.

The fourth pathway starts from the urgent need to increase the employment opportunities of persons who are on social security benefits or working in the informal sector. Active labour market policies and social security should offer sufficient opportunities and incentives to return to work and to facilitate this transition. Long-term welfare dependence could thus be prevented. By formalizing informal economic activities, increased financial resources can be raised for building up a more comprehensive social security system. For a clear understanding, it has to be stressed here that these policy concepts are principles and not necessarily practices in Europe (see also Chapter 12 about ALMPs).

The EU respects the autonomy of each Member State regarding labour market and social policies – and differences in country traditions and conditions – and therefore does not promote a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

Defining flexicurity and analytical frameworks

Since the launch of the term there has been a boost of literature about flexicurity. It has become a buzzword. Among academics and politicians and social partners there is often confusion and controversy on how to define and measure flexicurity (Chung, 2011, Viebrock and Clasen, 2009).

In literature and debates the following three definitions and frameworks of 'flexicurity' can be observed in terms of: 1) policy efforts; 2) institutional configuration; and 3) 'outcomes' in the labour market.

In the first section of this chapter, we have already given the definition in which flexicurity is seen as a policy concept. This definition of enhancing both flexibility and security in a coordinated way is broadly cited in the literature. The element of 'synchronization' in the definition is an important condition in the concept. It distinguishes it from policies that are reactive, usually with significant delay, and are designed to repair excess flexibility or security. Traditionally, policies to enhance flexibility are reactions to adjust arrangements or institutions that are considered 'too tight', and policies to promote security are reactive on the observation that the insecurity for groups of workers is too high. The assumption underlying the concept is that flexibility and security can be complementary and mutually supportive, so an integrative and broad approach of flexibility issues in combination with security issues is needed at negotiation tables.

Additionally, flexicurity can be seen as 'state of affairs'. Here a distinction can be made by an institutional state and a labour market state. Referring to the first, flexicurity can be defined as a configuration of institutions that enhance flexibility as well as security for workers (active or inactive) and companies, and in labour markets. The (re)presentation of the Danish flexicurity model (or 'golden triangle') is particularly framed by an institutional approach (although it is, to support or illustrate the functioning of the institutions, combined with labour market data) (see Madsen, 2004). The first pillar of this Danish system concerns the low set of regulations on hiring and firing, generating a flexible labour market. The second pillar consists of generous income protection in case of unemployment, providing a safety net. The third pillar of the Danish system is an activating, tripartite organized labour market approach, aimed at re-integrating redundant workers into other companies. So, the combination of these three institutional pillars of the Danish system guarantees and facilitates high degrees of flexibility (external-numerical) *and* security (of income and re-employment) in the welfare state and labour market. This institutional constellation is the result of a long historical development with 'struggles' in industrial relations (see also Madsen, 2004). Inspired by this institutional approach, researchers have tried to measure the EU countries by institutional indicators that guarantee and facilitate forms of flexibility and security.

A third analytical framework for flexicurity concerns the *outcomes* in the labour markets and welfare states. Are flexicurity policies or balanced configurations of institutions also leading to flexibility and security results in practice? One of the problems of merely assessing policies or regulations by desk-research is the complexity in which formal rules are working in the legal and employment relations practices, as is showed by Bertola et al. (2000) in their critique of the Employment Protection Legislation indicator (EPL) used by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Another trap pertains to phenomena that develop outside the scope of traditional institutions (to stay with the same EPL-example: flexible contracts that emerge in the shadow of the 'normal' employment contracts). Because flexicurity refers to transitions during life courses of citizens, it is important to make longitudinal analyses in which individual workers are followed in their income and working careers. Existing data sets only partly allow for this kind of analysis.

The complexity regarding the concept of flexicurity is increased further by the fact that policies can be developed at different levels and the outcomes can vary at these different levels. Therefore a multi-level approach is needed in the analyses of strategies, regulations, and outcomes. European, national, sectoral, regional, local, firm, and individual workers' level can be distinguished. The firm level should not be neglected because here the flexicurity opportunities (or barriers) – and therefore negotiations – often come together. Furthermore, company policies can develop rather autonomously by transforming firm-external institutions for their own profits (Teubner, 1994).

Moreover, both flexibility and security are multi-dimensional concepts, which take various forms. Inspired by Atkinson (1985) four forms of flexibility can be distinguished: external-numerical,

Table 13.1 Trade-offs and interconnections between types of flexibility and types of security

	Job security	*Employment security*	*Income security*	*Combination security*
Flexibility:				
External- numerical				
Internal- numerical				
Functional				
Wages/variable pay				

internal-numerical, functional and wage flexibility. Wilthagen (Wilthagen and Rogowski, 2002; Wilthagen and Tros, 2004) has linked these with four forms of security: job, employment, income, and combination security (see Table 13.1). Where job security is defined as the security to stay in the same job with the same employer, employment security refers to the possibility for workers to remain employed, not necessarily in the same job or with the same employer, and the possibility for the unemployed to make the transition to paid work. Income security regards the security of income replacement in the case the job is lost. Combination security is the security of a worker being able to combine his or her work and the private domain of life. As already indicated, an important assumption in the flexicurity concept is that forms of flexibility and forms of security can be complementary and mutually supportive.

Another fundamental idea is that flexibility is not just profit for capital and security not only profit for labour. Also an employer wants to be sure about a committed and qualified workforce and an employee needs flexibility in order to combine work and private life.

These underlying ideas become more clear if concrete forms of flexibility and security are combined. Both external-numerical flexibility and employment security can be enhanced by productive and sustainable job-to-job transitions. The same goes with the combination of internal-numerical flexibility and job security by varying working hours and at the same time maintaining stability in the number of employed staff. Functional flexibility through investments in the workers' employability of work (by means of training and education or task/job rotation) can enhance job as well as employment security. Likewise more complementary configurations of flexibility and security are possible and can be observed in employment practices.

The four forms of security and the four forms of flexibility can be put in a flexicurity matrix and serve as an analytical and heuristic framework at various levels, including companies' HR practices.

Practices of flexicurity policy

In this section we briefly present national examples of flexicurity according to the policy definition.

The Netherlands

The Flexibility and Security Act (1999) is the most illustrative example of flexicurity policy in the Netherlands because several longer existing policy dossiers on dismissal legislation, atypical workers and (activating) social security were integrated in the discussion that led to it. Another important characteristic of this flexicurity case is that this reform could not have been launched and implemented without the early active involvement of the social partners. With this Act several measures have been introduced. Dismissal procedures for regular employees were fastened, the permit system for temporary work agencies was abolished, the legal position of temporary work agency workers was strengthened (such as sickness benefits and building up rights to more secure employment contracts), on-call employees were given rights to a minimum number of paid hours and the number and total duration of consecutive fixed term contracts was set at a maximum of three contracts (previously two) within three years. In collective bargaining deviations from the latter provision were made possible. The relationship between the worker and the temporary work agency is in principle considered as a standard employment contract, the agency being the legal employer, in which the workers built up rights after some time. As part of the whole flexibility and security package deal the employers and trade unions in the temporary work agency agreed on new regulations in their collective labour agreements. Several evaluation studies of the Flexibility and Security Act have been conducted in better and in worse economic conditions. It is clear that the Act has contributed to a political and juridical acceptation of atypical contracts and has increased flexibility options for employers. Especially the use of fixed-term contracts has grown significantly. There is much discussion on the question of whether the Act has indeed increased the security for flexible workforces. Houwing (2010) studied the implementation of the Act and concludes that the more the implementation is done at the local level (which is the aim of the flexible multi-level regulation system), the less security for flexible workers seems to be guaranteed. In recent years the Dutch trade unions increased their criticism on the unbalanced effects of the law. Also longitudinal research in the Netherlands shows relatively low levels of transitions into open-ended employment contracts, lower investments in education and training, and higher feelings of insecurity.

Sweden

In Sweden the employers' organizations and trade unions play an important role in designing 'employment security agreements' and 'transition agreements'. The first agreement dates from 1974 when there was massive job loss of white collar workers in Sweden. Over the last decades the social partners have created more frameworks for how restructuring should take place in their labour market segments. Some agreements aim at avoiding dismissal and facilitate voluntary job mobility, while others aim at compensation and 'transition support' in terms of outplacement and education facilities or, in fewer cases, severance payment to redundant workers (Borghouts-van de Pas, 2012; Bergstrom, 2009; Sebardt, 2006). In relation to these collective agreements, the social partners established bipartite 'employment security councils' or transition agencies at the sector level, financed by employers' fees based on 0.3% of the labour costs. The system operates as a form of insurance system, distributing the risk and costs of economic dismissals among the companies in the branches. The councils provide consultation in early stages of restructuring along with outplacement services for redundant workers, and finance temporarily salary gaps in case of outplacement to lower-paid jobs. Sometimes these councils employ job coaches/trainers, sometimes these services are outsourced to private providers.

There are extra incentives for employers to bargain with trade unions if they want to deviate from legal standards in the seniority rules that are set by law. It is a common practice in larger companies that legal standards are put aside by offering prolonged dismissal period (to have more time to look for other jobs) and extra 'transition packages' to the benefit of redundant employees. Similar developments – 'change security funds', tripartite 'Flexicurity Committees' at the sector level – can be witnessed in Finland.

Sweden is one of the countries that has been hit hard by the recent financial crisis, but many redundant workers have found new jobs. At the same time, however, youth unemployment has increased substantially, leading to increased discussion about the inequality between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in the Swedish labour market (see Bergstrom, 2009).

Belgium

In 2009 the Federal government in Belgium introduced the Economic Recovery Law, in which outplacement rights and obligations for redundant workers were strengthened and all private employers in restructuring were obliged to install 're-employment cells' to promote fast replacement of their dismissed workers to other paid work. This legislation is a follow-up of the Belgian approach to promote longer working careers of older workers by giving workers aged 45 and above rights to 60 hours of outplacement support in case they are collectively or individually dismissed (Generation Pact, 2005; national CLA 82bis, 2007). In addition, since 2009 redundant workers over the age of 45 have entitlements to outplacement support – 30 hours during three months – and not only companies that concluded pre-pension arrangements, but all restructuring companies have to organize and finance outplacement support.

The implementation of these legislative measures is tested in the juridical procedure with the regional governments for getting permission for the effectuation of the restructuring. If bipartite social plans or companies' restructuring programmes are not 'activating' enough, the company is not allowed to do the restructuring. Before effectuating the first dismissal, the employer has to install a re-employment cell, boarded by the public employment service (chair), trade union(s), the sector/local education fund, and the employer. Already in their notice periods the redundant workers have to enrol in this 'cell' and to participate in the outplacement programme that is organized and that is respecting the quantitative and qualitative standards in legislation and the applicable national collective labour agreements. In case of insufficient efforts by the employee in this reintegration phase in looking for another job or to following a re-training or re-education programme, the public employment service can sanction the employee by lower unemployment benefits.

This Belgian case is an example of a structural and encompassing policy of enforcing 'activating restructuring'. All workers aged 45 and above, as well as those who lose their jobs by individual dismissal, have outplacement rights and obligations, including standards of length and timing. Although the access to outplacement support is increased significantly by this policy, the effective re-placement rates for employees aged 50 are rather low, far lower than for younger workers. Overall, in the period 2007–10, 35–54% of the redundant employees found other paid employ- ment within six months after registration due to this system. For the workers aged 50+, the figure lies between 11 and 24% (Tros, forthcoming). Further, it is evident that the replacement rates are significantly lower among the low-educated employees. Not only do the age and level of education play a significant role in the chance to find a new job, but also the entitlement for pre-pension arrangements. 50+ workers in firms with pre-pension schemes make less than half of the job-to-job transitions compared to those in firms that do not arrange such schedules. Therefore it can be concluded that the policy on supporting re-placement of dismissed workers is not integrated with an activating approach in social security arrangements The majority in pre-pension arrangements are dispensed from the obligation to apply for new jobs and the threshold for pre-pension in Belgium can be still set on the age of 50 (although this might change quickly due to the austerity measures the recently appointed government is considering). There are also shortcomings in low education and training investments. Further criticism can be formulated with respect to the missed opportunities to negotiate these unilateral legislative measures synchronically with measures to enhance job security and investments in the employability of the older workers and more flexibility in the procedures on collective dismissals and restructuring (see Tros, forthcoming).

France

The actors in the French industrial relations system do not tend to use the word flexicurity or *flexicurité* so much, but discuss similar subjects under the flag of *sécurisation des parcours* *professionnels* (making professional career pathways more secure), including work-life careers for vulnerable citizens and workers (see Meda, 2011).

In 2004 France introduced workers' rights to individual learning accounts (*Droit Individuel à la Formation*, DIF). These saving accounts (*comptes individuelles*) are open for all employees with open-ended employment contracts after one year of seniority. Rights for part-time workers are calculated *prorata tempori* of the contractual hours. Every year 20 hours are capitalized in the individual account and remain available for six years. Although this number of hours could be considered modest, this law is conceptually interesting because of the idea of the portability of the rights that are saved in the account, in case the workers make a transition to a different employer or in case of unemployment.

The introduction of the transferability of rights was part of a broader national agreement in 2008 in which more measures in flexibility and security subjects were taken to modernize French labour market institutions (Grimault, 2009). The DIF is also interesting because of the idea that individual training and education rights are explicitly linked to the professional career development of the worker, for example, it is used for IDEM *Validation des acquis de l'expérience* (recognitions of obtained competences). Other experiments in individual learning accounts in Europe are less oriented to the work environment or career development. In France it is discussed if these accounts just reflect a responsibility for the individual worker for his/her own employability or if the DIF will be organized further in a more collective way (Gautié and Perez, 2010).

Germany

The unemployment figures of Germany in the last years have amazed academics and politicians, and some speak about the 'German labour market miracle'. Where the other EU countries and the United States showed far rising unemployment in 2008–10, Germany showed stability in employment participation, notwithstanding the sharp drop of German gross domestic product (GDP). Although many reasons are given in the literature (such as the strict employment protection and the relative low numbers of workers that were employed by German firms before the crisis), there is less controversy on the statement that the German working time accounts and complementary short-time work allowances (Kurzarbeit) have played an important role to support labour hoarding in the economic downturn (for example, Eichhorst et al., 2010; Boeri and Brueckner, 2011).

Working time accounts in Germany facilitate flexibility in the number of hours (internal-numerical flexibility) by day, by week or over the year and are widely regulated in collective agreements and company arrangements in German workplaces. In 2009 it was estimated that in total 30% of German companies made use of working time accounts, either in the form of a reduction of hours that are saved in individual accounts or in the form of working time credits which will have to be worked in the future when business recovers (Dribbusch, 2009). In some months in 2009 there were in total 1.4 million persons in Germany in short-time work.

In reaction to the financial crisis several countries introduced new arrangements or expanded the scope of existing short-time work arrangements. These schemes are publicly sponsored facilities to prevent too much loss in human capital or bankruptcy caused too fast by temporary downturns in the economy. They function as a buffer to external-numerical flexibility by facilitating internal, working hours flexibility. Sometimes these schemes are an integral part of the unemployment insurance system. In practice firms make regular contributions to a pool or a fund and then draw money from these funds to compensate workers for the reduction in the hours worked during downturns. In some countries like Italy, Japan, and Germany between 2.5 and 5% of the workforce participated in such schemes in the high recession periods.

In other countries, such as the UK, no formal schemes exist, but a reduction of working hours is accepted by workers on a voluntary basis, by, for example, taking leave or holidays.

Flexicurity outcomes

Because the concept of flexicurity is intrinsically dynamic and focuses on transitions during people's life courses and on institutions that affect these behavioral patterns during the various stages of life, it is important to construct indicators within a dynamic and life course framework. An important dynamic indicator regarding the first flexicurity pathway is the mobility rate from temporary jobs into permanent jobs. This represents the so-called stepping-stone mechanism. Dynamic indicators for the second and third pathways include the transition of trainees moving into a better-paid job or into a permanent job after training or the number of people re-entering employment after some time in training. A dynamic indicator for the fourth pathway is the re-entry rate into employment within six or twelve months. Another dynamic indicator for social security is the degree the working or the non-working poor can escape from poverty minus the ones who jump towards poverty (see further Muffels et al., 2010).

Using dynamic outcome indicators (many more than illustrated above) with the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions for the years 2003–08 we can observe substantial differences among the various country clusters (or 'regimes') within Europe. The Nordic countries but also the UK appear to attain fairly high levels of dynamic employment and income security, notwithstanding the significant differences in industrial relations and labour market governance systems (Muffels et al., 2010; European Commission, 2010). In the UK the risks to income drops for those outside the labour market are relatively high. Additional social security could be developed to guarantee a better balance between flexibility and security. The findings on the Eastern and Southern countries reflect strongly the relative meagre outcomes of these segmented labour markets with respect to displaying low levels of mobility in terms of job, contract, and wage mobility and simultaneously low levels of income and employment security. The continental countries form a mixed picture. The Netherlands, Austria, and Germany might have relatively low rates of job mobility but manage to keep unemployment levels rather low, thereby relying on a growing shell of flexible employment. Here a risk of growing labour market segmentation exists. France and Belgium also have low mobility but offer a decent level of income protection to people that are not working. Whether these countries can continue to pay for this, given the impact of the crisis on public budgets, remains to be seen.

Dynamic indicators too have pitfalls when not combined with institutional indicators or when not evaluated in a qualitative institutional framework. To give some concrete examples: high job-to-job mobility (even when it is upwards) can reflect a bad allocation on the labour market. Or high rates of movement out of poverty or out of poor jobs can still mean that a country has lots of working poor or poor citizens. This remark also implies that not only does transition and duration matter, but so does the standard of quality of institutions in the labour market and welfare states. Institutional indicators are particularly important with regards to the security and flexibility of workers. Given the unequal power and dependency relations between labour and capital, labour law and collective agreements not only serve to enhance economic efficiency but also to promote equity and protection of the workers and citizens.

Furthermore, for a multifaceted concept as flexicurity, it is important – for the input side (institutions) as well as for the output side – to combine quantitative with qualitative research methods (see also Bertozzi and Bonoli, 2009).

A last remark we would like to make here is that over-aggregated figures at the national level (see European Commission 2010; RWI, 2011) can hide unequal distributions of flexibility and security. It is important to follow (in longer-time perspectives) specific weaker groups in the labour market such as low-educated workers, younger workers, older workers, and those in segments of low-quality working conditions.

Conclusion

Some commentators have criticized the concept as 'old wine in new bottles'. Although it is true that a search for flexibility and security in labour markets is not new, it can be considered new that this nexus is now more systematically conceptualized in the European context of consolidating economic policies with social policies. The concept of flexicurity has without a doubt given inputs to the European social dialogue and the European Employment Strategy. 'Flexicurity' has even become a European flagship policy and will remain so within the EU's 2020 strategy. Policy responses on the financial and economic crisis have shown that the concept is also still alive in – at least some – EU member states.

The recent emergence of new flexicurity policies, or elaborations on strategies established earlier, support the statement that the concept holds not only in favourable business cycle conditions. However, the (first) victims of the crisis have clearly been the workers with flexible employment contracts, while national policy practices were mostly restricted to the workers with open-ended employment contracts. European countries seem to be more active on the second flexicurity pathway (securing job-to-job transitions) and less to the first and fourth pathway (preventing segmentation and long term social exclusion). Flexible workforces still have limited access to training facilities and other forms of social protection (Alphametrics, 2009). This situation risks further segmentation in labour markets in which flexibility and security is very unequally distributed in societies. Persistent youth unemployment risks negative effects in the following living and working stages of this young generation (so-called scarring effects). Another limitation has been seen in European countries since the Dutch case of 1999 (Flexibility and Security Act) less integrated bargaining of several forms and combinations of flexibility and security has been done, although good practices are available (Eurofound, forthcoming).

How to progress further? It is clear that the concept is not an easy 'policy tool' that can be implemented by technocrats or 'policy engineers' by simply pushing the right buttons. It needs tripartite and bipartite bargaining, social dialogue, and political initiatives. Burroni and Keune (2011) have argued that the concept is vague and cannot overcome the traditional views and positions between the social partners at the European level. It is even argued that flexicurity reflects a friendly package that just contains the message of individualization and deregulation (Keune and Serrano, forthcoming; see also Meda, 2011). We have argued in this chapter that flexicurity is a (re-)regulation approach that has come in to rebalance the one-sided and narrow-focused liberal political debates of the 1980s. The way the concept is often used in the discussions in the last decade has shown that the concept comes easily in the territory of mere flexibility and employers interests while securities and flexibilities that work for workers are still underdeveloped. If further policy responses to the crisis are dominated by liberalization and cost-cutting in public budgets for social policy, then the concept of flexicurity will be further eroded. It will undermine the most important condition for developing flexicurity strategies: mutual trust and working on better perspectives for decent jobs and (working) lives. In our view, national and local governments as 'third actors' can play a role in bridging the positions of labour and capital and need to provide long-term perspectives for groups of vulnerable workers in society. However, too much polarization or fragmentation between the positions of employers and trade unions can also mean that governments will take unilateral measures that will lead to unbalanced policy outcomes. Moreover, new networks, such as associations of self-employed people, will and should also come into play, as the traditional social partners can not be the only carriers of flexicurity.

Maybe the picture is not so bleak. In some countries the social partners share a more common view on the concept and a majority of trade unions in the EU member states in 2011 (even in the crisis) still believe that flexicurity has the potential to provide win-win situations (Voss and Dornelas, 2011, p. 70). There is a hunger to learn from flexicurity practices in other countries. But concrete initiatives have to be taken, preferably with broad views to combine (several forms of) flexibility and security over the life course. We agree with Schmid (2006) and the European Expert Group on Flexicurity (2007) that for this to happen new forms of solidarity and risk-sharing are needed to achieve a joint risk management by encouraging people to take more risks – and for this to happen not less, but *more* security is needed. A collective version of social investments and career management is needed to give work-life perspectives, especially to the weaker groups in the labour market.

The question is whether a real alternative to flexicurity exists. The hybrid, multi-sided approach of the concept at least guarantees the interest of both employers and workers and their representatives. Alternative concepts, that merely focus on one dimension, can probably not achieve this. Flexicurity is well in line with Europe's overall ambition to maintain and further develop a competitive social market economy with full employment and high levels of protection, as formulated in the Lisbon Treaty.

At the end of the day it is an empirical matter: can welfare and well-being be ensured during the life courses of the citizens under rapidly changing economic conditions?

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